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S E C R E T TIRANA 000246

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV KCOR KHLS AL

SUBJECT: CUSTOMS DIRECTOR FIRED ON EVE OF ELECTION CAMPAIGN

REF: CIAWASHING 3041143

Classified By: Pol-Econ Chief Paul Poletes for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) On April 15, the Ministry of Finance dismissed Customs General Director Perparim Dervishi and replaced him with a Customs technocrat, Endri Pema. Dervishi has served as head of Customs for almost four years. Concerning his dismissal, the Deputy Minister of Finance publicly stated, "At the end of 2008 and beginning of 2009, the level of collections from Customs did not meet the plan of the Ministry of Finance for several reasons, including the (global economic) crisis." Dervishi later noted that that returns from the first three months of 2009 were 1 billion lek (10 million USD) lower than the same period in 2008, and cited this as the cause of his firing. Both sides deny any political motivations in the dismissal.

¶2. (S) Yet the firing of a high level official dealing with significant monetary revenues for the government so close to national elections has caused many to speculate on the political motivations. Sources within the Customs Agency have told Post that one reason for Dervishi's dismissal could have been the souring of relations between Customs and certain businesses, caused by Dervishi's rough-handed approach. Others claim that Dervishi did not bring in sufficient bribe money to the ruling party's election campaign coffers, as reportedly requested by Finance Minister Bode (see reftel).

¶3. (C) Dervishi's replacement, Endri Pema has served for 15 years in the Customs Agency, a rarity in a country where everyone down to the janitor is replaced when a new political party comes to power. Media have pointed out that Pema's wife's sister is a close friend of Prime Minister Berisha's daughter, but the tie is tenuous at best. According to Customs sources, Pema is a technocrat who has dealt strictly with administrative issues his whole career and is far from a political player. They do not see Pema's appointment as political, but as a temporary fill for a position that has historically been given to political players close to the ruling party.

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